

# Keston Newsletter

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*A student worshipper in the Catholic Cathedral, Shenyang, northeast China*

## **The Astonishing Popularity of Christian Faith in Today's China**

**by Martin Conway**

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For those of us privileged to have some first-hand awareness of the situation and struggles of Christians in today's People's Republic of China, the way Christian faith has won the hearts of millions of people in a land so often considered by earlier missionary strategists to be one of the most difficult in the world, is nothing less than a revelation of the power and truth of God's Holy Spirit.

This 'wave' of Christianity grew out of the total collapse and confusion (the film *Farewell My Concubine* remains a telling exposition of

this) into which the 'Cultural Revolution' – now more often referred to inside China as the 'ten wasted years' – had plunged the entire nation from the mid-1970s onwards.<sup>1</sup> It began to take public shape with the restoration and re-opening of the first church building in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, on Easter Day 1979, soon followed by the first national

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<sup>1</sup> See Bob Whyte's *Unfinished Encounter – China and Christianity*, London: Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1988, p.305ff.

gatherings of Catholic and Protestant leaders in the spring of 1980. Since then the growth has been noticeable in many different ways, sometimes by the quantity of new churches opening each week (in the earlier years one heard of two, later of at least three or four!), sometimes by highly varied numbers, almost always in millions (though the more careful will always say that one can only guess at actual figures), more often nowadays by the evident large number of people regularly attending Christian services in the hundreds of different cities and thousands of rural areas across this vast country.

### Foreign Missionaries

This new growth contrasts startlingly with the earlier experiences of Christian ‘beginnings’:

- the Persian monk, Alopen, from the ‘Church of the East’, arriving along the ‘silk road’ in 635 AD at the court of the Tang Emperor Tai Zong in today’s city of Xi’an;
- the Catholic John of Montecorvino, sent by Pope Nicholas IV in 1289 to the court of the Mongol Emperor Khubilai Khan in Khanbaliq (today’s Beijing = ‘Northern Capital’);
- the Jesuit Matteo Ricci who found his way from Portuguese Macao in 1582 to the Imperial Court in Beijing in 1601 – possibly the most outstanding single story of missionary courage, perseverance and profound, intelligent and discerning faith in Christian history since those of the first disciples in Acts;
- the Protestant Robert Morrison, who worked from 1807 onwards as a translator in the office of the British East India Company in Canton/Guangzhou (the only place in China where foreigners were allowed to live) which led in 1819 to the publication of the first Bible in Chinese (after the ‘failure’ in one way or another – again see Bob Whyte’s detailed stories in *Unfinished Encounter* – of the other three ‘beginnings’).

Morrison was followed during the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by hundreds of other foreign missionaries, almost all from Europe and North America, both Catholic and Protestant, not least because of the ‘unequal treaties’ imposed on the failing Qing dynasty by the European powers, whose activities, taken

overall, led to the hostile, but all too telling, slogan: ‘One more Christian, one less Chinese’.

The Boxer rebellion of 1900-1901 was one attempt to ‘overcome’ that manifold – if by no means convincingly ‘successful’ – missionary thrust, a rebellion dispersed by an invasion of the ‘western powers’ this time conquering the exhausted Qing dynasty.



*Nestorian Tablet, erected in 781, describes the arrival of the ‘Luminous Religion’ in China with the monk Alopen*

### The Rise of Mao

After the long years of power struggles between various ‘warlords’ until the Japanese invasion in the 1930s, Mao Tse-Tung’s Marxist victory and revolutionary programme from 1 October 1949 onwards was to some degree a political success, indeed a great relief for the majority of Chinese. Yet it, too, led to an extremely thorough ‘modernisation’, indeed even ‘westernisation’, of what was left of earlier Chinese culture and civilisation.

The new beginnings of Christian faith in China since the later 1970s represent the first purely and distinctively Chinese missionary initiatives that the country has ever known, and undoubtedly owe their astonishing success to this ‘home-grown’ character, with all the pain and suffering that lies behind it. It is vital to recall this background in order to understand how startlingly different is the scene today.

### Visit to China in 2007

From my last visit to China, in December 2007, I can point to two very different moments, both joyous and entirely typical of today. On my first Sunday I went to the morning service, as my wife and I had done in 1986, at the ‘Community Church’ on the southwest side of central Shanghai. There I discovered that the small gallery in the handsome church, built by North Americans in the 1930s, was now reserved for people who

needed earphones to follow the service through simultaneous translation into English, and that the worshippers were filling not only the body of the church down below me as I sat there, but also all three of the other main halls in the big building alongside. The crowd that emerged an hour or so later into the garden from all four gatherings was huge, to the point where the queues for tea or coffee were as daunting as the countless conversations flowing were lively!

Nearly two weeks later, as I arrived in Beijing, I learned from my host there, a teacher at the Beijing University of Languages and Culture, that he had that morning put up a hand-written poster on the campus inviting anyone interested to hear an address by me the next day. As a result I had an audience of some 60 people, the majority post-graduates, who not only had no difficulty listening to me and putting comments and questions in English but were unfailingly intelligent in their reactions and clearly deeply interested in the sorts of experiences I had been talking about. I have no way of knowing how many of them would have called themselves Christians – probably only a few in any formal sense – but they were one of the best audiences I have ever encountered.

### **Aspects of Church Life**

Today's picture, however, is not totally straightforward and hopeful. One hears not only of any number of independent and unregistered churches in provinces such as Henan (known for its 'Christianity fever'), but also of downright false and dangerous teachings arising in rural areas where there are as good as no trained ordained ministers or further education available to local people. I have had little chance to investigate this kind of phenomenon – China is, after all, a vast and very diverse place – nor do I know how to appraise the article in the 11 October 2008 *Guardian* supplement which tells a horrific story about thousands of young Chinese girls trafficked as prostitutes into the UK: I was startled to read that the author of the article, on visiting the province of Fujien on the south coast, from which apparently the majority of these girls come, and driving out to villages named by at least some of them to UK immigration officers as their homes, had found these

'dominated by new churches as large as ocean liners. We call in on one, the True Jesus Church, and ask the pastor, Chen Jin

Yun, if she will help us find families whose children have gone missing in Britain. She laughs. "Many have got children working in the UK. They love it there, but keeping in contact is always a struggle".'

In contrast, I can witness from a visit on Palm Sunday 2000 to what seemed at the time, and still does, the most impressive and memorable service of Christian worship I have ever attended, all the more so because I could not understand a single word! This was in the Catholic 'Northern Cathedral' ('Bei-tang') in Beijing, where a priest who had been an outstanding student of our English department in Selly Oak in the early 1990s, told me he would be leading the 8 a.m. Mass in the new Chinese liturgy which the Chinese Catholic Church had recently drawn up. From our taxi, stopping some 100 yards short of the Cathedral gate, because of the huge crowd coming out of the 7 a.m. service, we struggled through them and arrived inside shortly before 8 a.m. There were no seats left, and people were still crowding up to let in late-coming friends, so we had to stand with many others around the walls. There was an atmosphere of unusual quiet, yet at the same time of active and eager anticipation; I cannot find words for it, but one was unmistakably aware of a huge congregation, of some 3,000 or so, waiting but in no way at rest, rather sitting forward and communally willing the service to begin.

It then did, as the priest, my friend, in a simple black cassock and white stole, entered accompanied by a small boy with a censor. He arrived behind the altar, knelt a moment, and then stood up and sang an opening greeting to the congregation who, with evident thrill, sang back to him at full voice. The service proceeded entirely by the mutual singing of verses and responses which everybody clearly knew by heart since there was not a book in any hand. The only spoken part of the service (all was in Mandarin – totally unlike the Latin, if inaudible, liturgy that I had experienced in Catholic churches on earlier visits) was the sermon, with even the preceding readings chanted from the lectern by people coming out of the congregation to do so. The feeling of joy and delight in it all, clearly shared by virtually everyone I could observe, was unmistakable. To crown it, we then had to push our way out of the cathedral and down the path to the gate, through the weight and eagerness of the 9 a.m. congregation who were struggling to get in just as we had an hour earlier!





*Interior of a modern Protestant church in the Pudong area of Shanghai*

### Some Explanations

What are the 'reasons' for this level of eager and joyful faith? It is above all the work of the Holy Spirit. No purely human agency could produce it, and it is no doubt closely bound up with the profound hurts and frustrations of earlier periods in modern Chinese history. It is also – forgive the massive generalisation – undoubtedly to do with the lack in today's China of any alternative source for a central, profound, holistic and spiritually empowering meaning or purpose in life.

The 'classic' Chinese civilisations, invariably lived out by an upper class separated from the mass of Chinese people, have long since died out, even if gifted individuals can still produce many of the skills that brought them about in earlier centuries. 'Modernity' was struggling to make an impact in the '20s and '30s, exemplified by the Christian Sun Yat-Sen who managed to get himself elected as 'President of the Provisional Republic of China' in December 1911, to be overthrown by a warlord a matter of weeks later. Mao's totalitarian Chinese Marxism then had its successes in the early years after his victory speech on 1 October 1949, saluting the fact that 'the Chinese people have stood up', but collapsed into a wholly inappropriate power struggle within the Party during the 'Cultural Revolution', and was succeeded, after some difficult years of uncertainty, by a reliance on economic policies that aimed to follow the most successful practices of the Western nations, while retaining power, nationally and at every other level, in the hands of the self-appointing and self-governing Party. China's leaders have certainly learned a good deal over

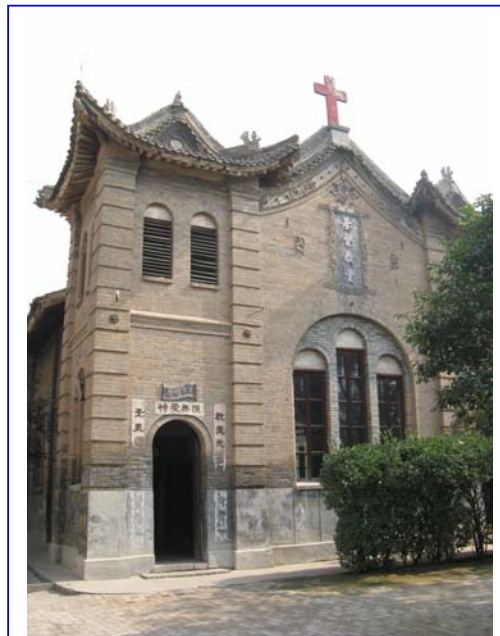
the last 20 years about the strengths and weaknesses of retaining total power, apart from over the economy, but are clearly unable – despite various attempts with one President's 'seven points' or another's 'five maxims' – to produce what the Chinese people are longing for in terms of a convincing and meaningful purpose in life.

Christian faith, through a wide diversity of channels, is now having an astonishing 'success' in motivating and guiding millions of Chinese people – this may be no more than a significant 'minority', possibly as many as 8% or 10% in

all – but out of a population of some one and a half billion people, this is still a large crowd by European standards. These people are to be found in at least three very different constituencies: each will expect to find in their faith different 'results' and priorities, if only because of their different social and educational backgrounds.

### Converted by Missionaries

The first of these constituencies includes the people who have managed to 'retain' the faith that they had learned from their parents and grandparents or others close to them, who in turn had accepted this 'foreign faith' from the witness of the missionaries. I remember in



*Church built by missionaries in a Chinese style*

Fujian province, on our first visit, hearing about two elderly ladies who in 1980 had had the temerity to go to the communal authorities and ask whether they could re-open the church they had attended until 15 years earlier. This request, to their surprise, had been granted, and they began to hold a very simple weekly service based on the prayers which the two had prayed together in a back room each week during even the worst of the Cultural Revolution. These meetings had not been noticed at the time, and now bore remarkable fruit as many began to join in.

I have been privileged to meet, hear and get to know the man who, more than any single other, has supported, in his modest but always attractive way, the entire (Protestant) China Christian Council for the last 30 years and more, Bishop K. H. Ting.<sup>2</sup> Born in 1915 and ordained in and for the Anglican Church in China in 1942 after some years working as secretary of the student department of the Shanghai YMCA, he has had to struggle

with many different principalities and powers over the 93 years of his life – so far! – but still serves as an icon of all that is best and most universal in the Christian faith, which he inherited from his family, and which he has practised and taught. He has undoubtedly been more important – both in his contacts with government, with other faith leaders, and then with the thousands of ministers he has helped to train in the Nanjing (= ‘Southern Capital’) United Theological College, let alone in his foreign travels and through his world-wide friendships with theologians and others active in circles such as the WCC – than any single other Chinese. He has probably been at least as surprised as anybody else by the enormous swell of interest in Christian faith in China during recent years.

This first constituency also includes the less sophisticated such as the congregation

<sup>2</sup> There are now two large and full studies in English of the life-long witness of this great man: Philip Wickeri's *Reconstructing Christianity in China – K. H. Ting and the Chinese Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007, 516pp – American Society of Missiology Studies No. 41) and Jieren Li's *In Search of the Via Media Between Christ and Marx – A Study of Bishop Ding Guanxun's Contextual Theology* (Lund, Sweden: Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, 2008, 469pp – Studia Missionalia Svecana CVI).



Bishop K.H. Ting

described in a charming anecdote by Rob Gifford.<sup>3</sup> When he found himself halfway across the centre of China in the Shaanxi provincial countryside on a Sunday morning, he entered a simple little village church, one of dozens in the area, which had ‘some pictures of Jesus on the walls, bare, low benches for pews, and an altar at the front with the Chinese character *ai*, meaning “love”, written large on it in bright red.’ Since the minister, who had several churches to look after, had not arrived, he found himself invited, indeed, as an ‘Ocean Person’ expected, to preach the sermon, and

eventually did so, surprising himself by leading a prayer:

‘out loud, in Chinese. The congregation in turn starts praying out loud, one person after another, overlooking the rather poor sermon I have just preached and thanking God for this Ocean Person who has delivered the message, praying that God will bless him and them, and then saying simply, “Thank you God, for your love”.’

There was, he concluded:

‘a purity and intensity to Christian believers in China and it overflows in their prayers. [...] This is perhaps how it is meant to be, I think to myself, as the final “Amen” rises from the congregation.’

### Rural Chinese Believers

The second constituency (clearly overlapping with the congregation in Gifford’s story) includes rural Chinese who have more recently come to Christian faith. Here I am relying on a carefully researched and remarkably persuasive paper by Caroline Fielder, the recent China Desk staff member of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, given at the 2007 AGM of the Friends of the Church in China (FCC), on ‘*The Growth of the Protestant Church in Rural China*’. She highlights first the attractive simplicity of the Protestant message and structures:

‘newcomers can be welcomed and cared for through the programmes. The witness of the church, and the warmth and support

<sup>3</sup> *China Road – A Journey into the Future of a Rising Power*, London: Bloomsbury, 2007, pp.136-140).



Three village women

offered to the local community, can have a great impact ... never truer than in the rural context where previously tight-knit communities are coming away at the seams.'

That last point connects with her second 'reason' for the church's growth: Chinese agriculture is changing fast as the amount of available land diminishes under the pressures of population growth and climate change; rural Chinese, who were the first to be 'released' into the reforms of Deng Xiao Ping in the late 1970s, and benefited greatly in their early years, have now found themselves reduced in wealth and satisfaction. Their younger men are pulled into the lowest paid and most menial jobs in the rapidly growing cities, while their women, already sidelined in rural life, are even less satisfied with their lot, but at least offered in the church a place where they can have a real voice, a sense of community, a new family and a social standing higher than they enjoy in the outside world.

Instances of faith healing are another factor which has led many rural people to Christian faith. These are often mentioned in discussions about the rural areas where 'finances and lack of adequate medical provision rule out adequate medical care':

'According to Revd Xue Lianxi more than 50% of the members of the rural churches in Anhui province became Christians due to faith-healing experiences.'

Two surprises, revealing aspects of rural religious life, befell Bishop John Austin (suffragan bishop of Aston in the diocese of Birmingham who was invited by Archbishop George Carey to serve as his contact-bishop for China in the early 1990s) while he was

driven into an area behind the ridge of hills, which divides Anhui province, where the China Christian Council (CCC) leaders in Nanjing had heard about newly created churches. He noticed a small house in one village with a cross on its roof beam, and learned, when his car stopped and he knocked on the door, that the cross was there because a son of the household, having gone to work as a building labourer in Shanghai some months earlier, had come home with a copy of the CCC hymnbook and had taught the family to sing from it. Several families in the village then joined them, leading them to build an outhouse in the garden for their Sunday singing sessions which gave them all such pleasure. They learned that they could signal their joy to the world around by this sign on the rooftop!

Later that same day, the bishop's car was stopped by a blocked road in a village where a group of police were handling an evidently excited crowd. On asking what this was about the bishop and his interpreter were told that a disturbance had been caused by a crowd unhappy with a local healer. One part of the crowd had formed a circle round the healer's house to prevent others going in and attacking him for charging too much for his healing services. When the police realised that the man in the car was a Christian bishop, they asked him if it was normal for a Christian healer (as the man in the house evidently presented himself) to ask for money in return for healing. The astonished bishop, struggling to recall exactly what he had once read in the *Didache*, responded, 'No, healers have long been normally expected to offer their services free of charge,' following which the police removed the man from the house for further questioning, to the evident delight of the majority of the crowd.



A typical church interior



Caroline Fielder notes that healing often includes some elements of exorcism which involve age-old practices of 'folk religion':

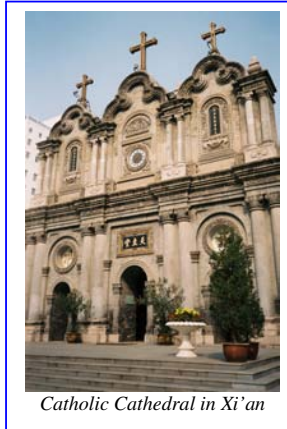
'In areas where this exercises a profound influence, demon possession is considered a reality, from which Christianity is increasingly seen as a means of escape, and thus a progressive force in traditional rural communities.'

'Another example of spiritual manifestation that has turned people to faith is that of visions and dreams. Many rural Chinese Christians perceive dreams and visions as God's way of communicating with them directly. Several of those I spoke to stated quite emphatically that dreams and visions were key in drawing them to Christ and in sustaining them through difficult times. [...] Those who recounted their dreams noted that they were unlike the dreams we normally have. They were often characterised by a special sense of clarity; people recounted an awareness of being momentarily moved into a new and different reality, and that those people or spirit beings that appeared to them were as tangible as you and I.'

### **Bible Reading**

Another factor behind the growth of Christian faith within this second constituency is the impact of being able to read the Bible for oneself in one's own language. A man who is now a doctor in Anhui explained to Caroline:

'how studying the Bible in a young people's fellowship helped him come to faith: "It took time to really understand the stories that were being told. During that time my life was a mess, I was gambling a lot, playing mah-jong and cards all the time, so that I was seriously in debt. I listened to the Gospel stories and liked them, but kept coming back to one thing. Did Jesus really come back from the dead? I felt that I needed an answer to this question, and read and read all I could, and asked lots of questions. [...] I knew that



*Catholic Cathedral in Xi'an*

this was a significant thing – for me the most important thing. [...] I thought about it more and more and realised that even those who had been with Jesus had doubted Him, especially as he faced death, but then they saw Him again and again and they were changed ... they believed in Him so much they saw Him as the Son of God, and after that they would risk dying for Him. They knew He was truth; that all He had said was true, and for them it was worth risking everything for. Suddenly I realised that it was not just a story but that it was true, and that if it was true then there could be no half measures”.

No doubt very similar experiences are happening to thousands of ordinary people in China today.

Of relevance here is the printing press, set up by the Amity Foundation (China's Protestant-based social development agency) with much help from the United Bible Societies, primarily to print Bibles in Mandarin and other Chinese languages, which celebrated in December 2007 its 50 millionth Bible. Since May 2008 it has acquired new machinery able to produce 12 million Bibles per year. Virtually all of these will be quickly snatched up for use from Amity's distribution centres all over China.



*New church at the Beijing Protestant Seminary*

### **Academic Circles**

The third constituency of Christian converts are university people, both teachers and students, who are searching, essentially in much the same way as the doctor in Anhui, for a truth that can last and empower life-long explorations into the common purpose of living in and for the larger world community, within which China now knows it is destined to work out its future. Already in the 1990s a Chinese professor of philosophy translated into Mandarin ('Putonghua' = the common speech) John Macquarrie's *Principles of Christian Theology*, a noted but very solid, long book by a Scots academic teaching in Oxford. This was published in paperback by a commercial firm in 250,000 copies, almost certainly many more than the original had ever known, yet which were sold out in 18 months.

This same translator remarked a few years ago that ‘almost every university in China will now have someone who teaches “religious studies” regularly, not for any exam syllabus, but to large and attentive audiences.’

This third constituency is characterised by its distance from the actual churches, resulting from the way higher education in earlier centuries was a mark of social and political distinction, eagerly sought by the few who could hope to attain it, and carrying with it a sense of separation from ‘ordinary mortals’, who were thought to benefit from the action of the educated and privileged, but not seen as fellow-citizens. From my conversations with academics I have learnt that membership of a local church is seldom seen as the ‘natural’ consequence of discovering the truth in Jesus as told in the Bible. This is not to suggest that such people refuse to join any form of ‘church’ – they will very often have their own groups of friends and colleagues who meet regularly to share their explorations and findings – but rather to indicate the width of the gap they evidently feel between their academic lives and that of the churches, which they have probably hardly experienced.

I know of no estimate of how many people have ‘become Christians’ through academic contacts and programmes. Nevertheless, I feel there is a dynamic and remarkably well-supported movement which is bound to make a huge difference to China in the generations ahead. I see evidence for this in the annual conferences in which the Chinese Academy of Social Studies’ Institute on World Religions draws together many of the leading figures in this whole movement; in my own experience of a one-off seminar such as I spoke at in the University of Languages and Culture in Beijing; and in the lists of names in the quarterly *Journal of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies* (almost entirely theological) in Hong Kong, to and from which there appear to be significant numbers of professors and doctoral students moving to and from tens of different universities in mainland China.

This movement will become all the more important as and when the organised churches provide the space and energy for some of their best educated ministers to make contact and share in activities and projects with the academics. The Catholic priest (the former Selly Oak student) at the ‘Northern Cathedral’ in Beijing has for several years devoted part of his time to a Beijing Institute for Christianity and Culture Study, with a journal and the

Sapientia book publishing house attached to it. Among the Protestants, the Nanjing Seminary, which offers university-level qualifications, has just this year moved to a new set of buildings close to, if not directly part of, the Nanjing University campus, with a view to developing close contacts and interaction with leading figures there. So, hopefully, through both these initiatives, a great deal more contact and mutual encouragement will be generated.

### Some Suggestions

How can I round off such a vast topic? What better way than to invite you to start discovering for yourselves the endlessly varied and interesting people about whom I have been writing. Join the Friends of the Church in China (FCC Secretary: Mrs Jean Gronset, 17 Rosetrees, Guildford, Surrey, GU1 2HS, [jgronset@dsl.pipex.com](mailto:jgronset@dsl.pipex.com). The FCC has kindly provided all the photographs for this article) which concerns itself with both Protestants and Catholics in China;<sup>4</sup> make full use of the books page on its website ([www.thefcc.org](http://www.thefcc.org)); ask one of the chaplains at your nearest university to introduce you to Chinese post-graduate students or academics on sabbatical there, and invite them to your home; and sooner or later go to China yourself, and visit whatever churches you can find. Above all, rejoice in the Lord! Give thanks to God for his unfinished but now active work in today’s China, and pray for comparably lively and fascinating new beginnings among us in Europe.



*Chinese Christians after a service*

<sup>4</sup> I have deliberately not written about church-state relations within China, since that is another topic with a vast history, as well as both endlessly diverse and complicated, depending on many different aspects of the overall situation as well as on specific local personalities. For Keston readers, well accustomed to this topic in Russia and other parts of the former Eastern bloc, let me simply stress that while this aspect of the situation is in some sense ‘present’ everywhere in China, more remarkable is the way that normal church life can proceed without constantly throwing up reference to it.



# Balkan Bishops

by Tim Abraham

‘A glass of plum brandy with your coffee?’ I don’t usually take strong liquor for breakfast, but having seen the sprightly 81-year-old Nikolaj, Metropolitan of Bosnia, accept I knew what to do. We were in the Bishop’s Palace in Prijepolje in southwest Serbia, having spent the night there after a warm and elaborate welcome the previous evening at the adjacent Mileševa Monastery. This was the middle day of three Bishop Geoffrey Rowell and I were spending as the guests of the Serbian Orthodox Church, thanks to a young monk who spent a year at St Stephen’s House in Oxford, but is now back at the Orthodox monastery in the former Montenegrin capital of Cetinje.

The Serbian Orthodox Church is one of the ‘autocephalous’ (self-governing) Churches within the Orthodox communion which, given the recent political division of Serbia, now covers Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Bosnia. Its head is the 94-year-old Patriarch Pavle, Archbishop of Pec, Metropolitan of Belgrade and Karlovci; but because of his ill health, the Patriarch’s duties are being undertaken by the Synod of Bishops under the Presidency of the senior Metropolitan, Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral. Even his most loyal followers had to admit to us that it was time for a change as the aged Patriarch languished in hospital.

The Serbian Orthodox Church has always been a strong symbol of Serbian nationalism, and as Serbia has received a series of political set backs over the past decade or so, the Church has increasingly been seen by Serbs as a source of stability and pride. As was made clear to us – albeit very politely – the Church regards the loss of Kosovo (now an independent country controlled by ethnic Albanians) as a betrayal by its Christian friends across Europe, not least in Britain.

It is hard not to have some sympathy. Over the past 20 years the Serbian-dominated Yugoslavia has fissured into seven independent states. Any dreams Serbia had of controlling a powerful Balkan bloc were destroyed by the despotic rule of Milosevic and his followers, leading to the extraordinary sight of NATO bombers attacking a European capital (Belgrade) in 1999. Whilst this year’s Eurovision Song Contest and elections giving a



*Patriarch Pavle, Archbishop of Pec, Metropolitan of Belgrade and Karlovci*

majority to the pro-EU parties show that normality is returning to Belgrade, the loss of Kosovo in February 2008 was a bitter blow to the Serbs.

Not only was Kosovo the site of the great patriotic battle of 1389 against the Ottomans (which the Serbs lost, but which has a place in Serbian folklore akin to that of, perhaps, Flodden Field or Culloden to the Scots) but it also contains some of the holiest sites of the Serbian Orthodox Church, including the Patriarch’s seat at Pec. It is as if Kent had declared itself independent from the rest of Britain, putting Canterbury in a foreign country.

Despite this, perhaps because of this perceived oppression, support for the Serbian Orthodox Church is strong – not only among the local faithful but also among rich expatriates, not least in the US, who have helped finance a spree of new church building across the region. One of the most striking examples of this is in the current Montenegrin capital of Podgorica (formerly Titograd), a lively and prosperous city, full of new office blocks and young professionals, where a new cathedral is being built. The structure is now complete but above ground the interior has yet to be started. The crypt, by contrast, has just been finished, its

walls covered with new frescoes, in traditional style, of a quality to match that of any medieval Orthodox craftsman.

After a hair-raising journey from Podgorica, at speed along the precipitous roads through the mountains of Montenegro with a little help from the local police, we reached the Mileševa Monastery across the border in Serbia. After the traditional gifts of bread and salt at the entrance to the monastery, Bishop Geoffrey's arrival into the Church of the Ascension was greeted by the magnificent bass singing of the resident monks and the swinging of the vast golden chandelier – a welcome reserved for only the most distinguished guests!

The formal proceedings had that element of 'holy chaos' so distinctive and attractive in Orthodox worship. I was not expecting, however, to see a woman in the congregation stride up to Metropolitan Nikolaj with a mobile 'phone just as he was about to give his formal speech of welcome. What 'phone call could possibly be that important to interrupt such a well-planned occasion? Indeed, what was the woman doing with a 'phone switched on in the middle of the service?

The Metropolitan was, however, unfazed as the woman approached him and stood by him during his speech. The call was in fact from his episcopal colleague, Bishop Filaret, the local Bishop of Mileševa, who should have been our host, but who at the last minute was laid up in a hospital bed in Belgrade. Having arranged for the Metropolitan Nikolaj to substitute for him, he was determined to check that all his plans for greeting his Anglican guests were going to plan in his absence. And he was determined to hear every word of the formal proceedings. It was not the last time we saw the mobile 'phone that evening.

Our welcome in the church was only the start of an evening of hospitality ending in a 20 course dinner for us and 40 locals, many of whom seemed to be senior lay folk in the church (the laity have a significant role in the Orthodox Church with many parallels to those in the Church of England). Though we had just celebrated Easter, the Orthodox were barely into Lent so there was no meat – but one hardly noticed. The local wine flowed generously. The only hiccup in the evening was when I asked the Metropolitan about Paddy Ashdown, who spent several years in Sarajevo as the EU's 'High Representative' – effectively, viceroy – of Bosnia Herzegovina. The Metropolitan's usually benign face

stiffened: yes, he had met Ashdown once but he preferred to deal with men of peace!

And this illustrated the paradox of our visit and the welcome we received – Britain is no longer seen as an ally; 'though Anglicans may be given the benefit of the doubt. It was not always like this – relations between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Church of England were particularly close during and immediately after the First World War in which Serbia supported the Entente Powers of Britain, France and Russia, and was rewarded with chunks of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to form the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later Yugoslavia, after the War. Our host plans to spend time in London sifting through extensive correspondence between Canterbury and Pec, now at the Lambeth Palace Library.

One final vignette illustrates how deep nationalism runs in the Serbian Orthodox Church and, arguably, how far they still have to travel before they can play a full part in the modern Balkans. We were driving to the Ostrog Monastery, and found ourselves in Niksic, the Birmingham of Montenegro, well known for its beer. A crowd had gathered in the main square for what turned out to be a political rally addressed by the President of Montenegro. We stopped the car and joined the edge of the crowd just as booing broke out at something the President had said. We asked our host why they were booing. He looked a little sheepish. They were showing their disapproval of the Orthodox Church and, in particular, his bishop who, unable to accept Montenegro's independence from Serbia, steadfastly refuses to stand for the Montenegrin national anthem on public occasions. Montenegro is a country of Orthodox Slavs; it does not require much to imagine what the bishop makes of the more recent independence of Kosovo, run by Muslim Albanians.

But there are real signs of hope. During our short visit we met three younger bishops, one still in his 30s – all with a much more forward-looking and less atavistic view of the world. All could do well as Patriarch – both for the Serbian Orthodox Church and for those of us who want to see a strong positive Christian presence in the potential trouble spots of the world. It will not be long before we find out whether any of them is being given the chance to lead their Church into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the Holy Synod chooses Patriarch Pavle's successor.

# Fr Stanislovas Dobrovolskis

by Janice Broun

Although I read all 79 issues of the samizdat *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church (CLCC)* I never came across the name of the Capuchin friar Fr Stanislovas Dobrovolskis, despite the fact that he was sought out for spiritual guidance by Lithuanians and even by Russians, for whom he became the best known Catholic priest in Lithuania.\*

He was born in 1918. From the beginning of his ministry, when he dared to denounce openly in his sermons the massive deportations of his people during the Soviet occupation during and after the war, he was blacklisted and spent eight years in the Gulag. In Vorkuta, his humble, unstinting care for others became widely known. During long periods when he was banned from parish work, he resorted to manual work – cleaning out canals, mending roads, derelict churches and roadside votive chapels, and tidying up overgrown cemeteries. Volunteers would often join him.

He specialised in collecting, repairing and forging, or carving, the metal and wood symbols, including the complex decorative crosses which were so characteristic of Lithuania, and the ‘suns’, candelabra disks surrounded by rays, with a cross carved in the centre, which had a pagan origin. He hung them on the walls of his presbytery in the remote, tiny village of Paberžė, and gave as many as 30,000 away to his visitors. Some found their way to Leningrad or Moscow, like those that decorate the flat of Natalya Trauberg, an 80-year-old Catholic who is also a Dominican tertiary.

Natalya Trauberg first met him when she moved to Lithuania for family reasons during the 1960s, at the time of the Second Vatican Council, and felt she needed to find a confessor. She had been deeply impressed by several Catholic priests of his generation, serious men, thoroughly grounded in spiritual matters before the Communist takeover. Fr Stanislovas was well known all over the country for his practical abilities – his reconstruction work – and his readiness to ignore restrictions imposed on the Church.

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\* This article is based on an interview given by Natalya Trauberg to Giovanna Paravicini of Russia Cristiana in *La Nuova Europa*, March 2008.

Many parents brought their children to him for First Communion, which was banned at the time, and he never refused them.

When Natalya met him, she had the same clear conviction – as she had when she met Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh and Fr Alexander Men – that she was in the presence of a man who ‘walked in the sight of God’. She herself was responsible for bringing a number of young Russians to meet him – mainly seekers who had only recently come into contact with the Church – ‘in fact typical young intellectuals from the capital’ such as Evgeni Barabanov and his wife, Vladimir Zelinsky, Mikhail Meerson-Aksyonov, Evgeni Hendricks, and some of Fr Alexander Men’s spiritual children. Fr Alexander himself visited him a couple of times.

Visitors would arrive in groups, and sit drinking tea and coffee until dawn, discussing their search for faith with Fr Stanislovas. He even extended his tiny house by building three rooms at the side to make more space for them all. He did not have anyone to help with domestic chores, so his visitors would do the cooking, cleaning and office work.

They included all sorts – believers, seekers, dissidents, intellectuals, students, drug addicts, alcoholics, Hindus, Hare Krishnas, Jehovah’s Witnesses, although all knew that the place was ‘bugged’ by the KGB, who often summoned Fr Stanislovas for interrogation and caused him much heartbreak. He never asked people’s surnames, went outside if they needed to talk privately, and burnt all his correspondence – even the letters from his bishops after Lithuania gained its freedom! He kept a portrait of Solzhenitsyn, a Lithuanian flag and many banned books in his presbytery. He always observed his rule as a religious, got up in the middle of the night for the Office, heard confessions and celebrated Mass everyday.

‘Franciscans live on alms,’ said Natalya, ‘and Providence ensured he was never lacking – but he gave money away with amazing generosity.’ She translated works by Chesterton, C.S. Lewis and the Spanish mystics for samizdat: ‘He gave me money I didn’t really need to help with my work –



“aren’t we both members of the same Mystical Body?” he used to say.’

Natalya had always been a believer, but it was only in Fr Stanislovas’s community that for the first time she discovered others of her own age, united by deep friendship. Now, she lamented, ‘they, and Fr Alexander’s spiritual children at Novaya Derevnja, have all gone their own ways, into different careers and life styles. The era of the neophytes has come to an end.’

What was the guidance Fr Stanislovas provided? He was by no means a liberal; he approached questions of morality very seriously. With some seekers who tried to take advantage of the prevailing atmosphere of moral permissiveness he employed irony, or a gentle smile, to uncover the self-deceptions behind their claims. Those who were convinced that they alone were in the right, those with the rigid views of ‘*Homo Sovieticus*’ distressed Fr Stanislovas who abhorred extremes and tried to develop a middle course, a ‘royal road’ which combined justice and compassion, but involved no sacrifice of integrity. Paradoxically, this Franciscan became a spiritual guide to many Orthodox. Some of the young who came to him were so disillusioned by the Russian Orthodox Church’s compromises that they wanted to leap over the wall and become Catholics, thinking that this would resolve their problems. Fr Stanislovas welcomed everyone, whatever their confession, but discouraged ‘conversions’ from one confession to another, maintaining that they were sometimes equivocal, often neither genuine nor motivated by a search for God.

Fr Stanislovas steered clear of any involvement in political activity, despite the fact that many dissidents came to him. They tried to get him involved in the opposition represented and recorded by the *CLCC*, and condemned him because he refused. He used to tell Natalya that

‘our struggle consists in praying, in living in an authentic way, trying not to become “sovietized” in the things which really matter.’

When Lithuania became independent once again he was accused by some, quite wrongly, of being ‘hand in glove’ with the ‘Bolsheviks’. Perhaps this was because Communists, who had often joined the Party for careerist reasons, sometimes came to him, and through his

recourse to the ‘royal road’, he did not turn them away, but continued to welcome everyone. He sometimes behaved like a ‘fool for Christ’: when celebrating Mass in a Vilnius church, instead of a sermon, he threw a wallet full of money on the floor and shouted,

‘What are you here for? Here is your god!’

When someone from Moscow came and started praising Lithuanian spirituality and Catholicism, he listened for a time and then cried,

‘What spirituality? Where did you see it? Here you can only find nationalism and paganism!’

He exaggerated, Natalya commented, but he believed that every Christian community must learn to face the truth about itself; he had no fear in exposing it.

He often visited Vilnius to meet people looking for faith – and always invited them to the same bar. While they drank coffee he would pile up the leftover plates and cutlery, recounts Natalya, so as to make the waitresses’ job easier. Once a would-be convert told Fr Stanislovas that he should not bother to do this but should concentrate instead on the real spiritual issues! When they strolled away and reached Gediminas Square, under the bell tower, Fr Stanislovas said,

‘My son, as yet you cannot enter the Church. You would be a Pharisee, one of those who killed God. Learn first to clear up what you make use of, and respect others and pay attention to their needs...’

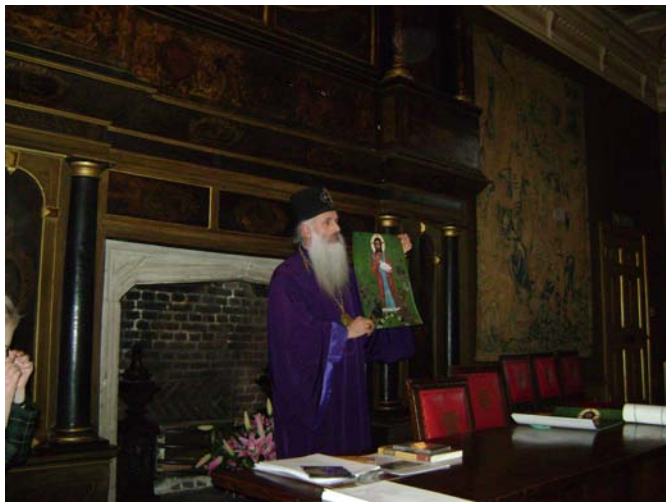
Although it was not easy for him to leave Paberžė where he had lived for 24 years, in 1990 he accepted the request of Cardinal Sladkevičius that he help restore the abandoned Monastery of Dotnuva. In his last years he was often misunderstood, and some priests even accused him of thinking like a Communist: his simplicity and evangelical directness were out of step with people’s desires to square accounts, assert personal rights, and demand compensation for wrongs suffered in the past.

He died on 23 June 2005. ‘In Orthodoxy there’s a concept of luminous sadness,’ says Natalya. ‘Fr Stanislovas possessed this, as he sought to live according to the Gospel and to reflect Christ in all his thought and action.’

# Home News

## *Keston AGM 2008*

Many more members and guests attended the Keston AGM on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2008 than in recent years – about 50 in all. Everyone seemed to appreciate the venue, the Charterhouse with its remarkable history, somewhat hidden behind Smithfield Market in central London, which the Master, Dr James Thomson, a Keston member, kindly allowed us to use.



*Archbishop Malkhaz Songulashvili speaking at the AGM in the Great Chamber of the Charterhouse*

After the meeting had dealt with Keston business, and following an excellent lunch, members were able to hear an address given by Archbishop Malkhaz Songulashvili of the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia, who is currently a Keston scholar and working on a D.Phil at Oxford. Many were surprised to see a Baptist *Archbishop* and, in addition, one dressed in a purple cassock with a tall cap on his head which looked very un-Baptist to English eyes. By way of explanation, Archbishop Malkhaz told a story about some animals that were asked to divide up into two groups, on one side the wise, and on the other the beautiful. One creature, a frog, did not join either group, and when asked why, answered that he was both wise and beautiful: this was the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia which adhered both to Georgian religious tradition and to Reformation theology. He went on to speak about the Russian invasion, the suffering of his people and the work of his Church, but without bitterness, and with an understanding of the sins committed by all sides. A poster

and prayer card with an icon of Christ as the Prince of Peace, showing in the background some of the destruction caused by the invasion, were handed out to all present.



*The Chairman introducing Edward Lucas*

Our second speaker was Edward Lucas, Deputy International Editor and Central and Eastern Europe Correspondent for *The Economist* who has been covering the region since 1986. He spoke about what he sees as a new 'Cold War' developing between

Russia and the West which is acting naively in its over-rosy view of post-perestroika Russia. Edward's sobering assessment deserves to be heard and acted upon by every politician in Europe and the USA, not just in the UK. He tied in his remarks with those of the previous speaker by giving his views on the Georgian tragedy. One point he made which struck listeners forcibly (and which the press has ignored) was his contention that Vladimir Putin, while President, had missed a once-in-a-lifetime possibility of using Russia's new oil wealth to improve the substructure of the country. As it is, roads remain potholed, Moscow traffic gridlocked and the best medical services out of reach of the majority of the population. Instead, the billions were siphoned off into the bank accounts of the new rich. Now those revenues have sharply declined, so the chance has passed Russia by.

### *Visit to Baylor University*



*Baylor University Campus*

Michael Bourdeaux and Xenia Dennen visited Baylor from 12-13 November 2008 for a Board meeting of the Keston Center for Religion State and Society, and in order to see what progress had been achieved in organising the Keston archive.

They arrived at Baylor at midnight local time

on 11 November (it was 6 a.m. English time) after their flight to Dallas was delayed. The next morning they were given a warm welcome at the Keston Center by Dr Christopher Marsh, the Director, and entertained for lunch in the faculty dining-room before a Board meeting of the Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies (the Keston Center forms a unit within this institute) which preceded a meeting of the Keston Center's Board scheduled for the next day. That afternoon they were shown round the campus in blazing sunshine and for the first time saw the Baylor bears (a bear is the University's symbol). On the second day Michael was asked to give a lecture to some of the Dawson Institute's students after he and Xenia had experienced some local colour – lunch at a typical Texan roadside café! In the evening Christopher Marsh and his wife Melissa took them out to dinner when they were able to forge closer bonds of friendship. He told them that he plans to come to



*Bottom right: Baylor's two bears recline in their enclosure*





*Michael contemplates unsorted boxes of archive material in warehouse*

England in June for the summer 2009 Keston Council meeting, and to spend part of 2010 in the UK on sabbatical. We will try to ensure that he has a chance to address Keston members at a meeting during his time in England.

Before the Keston Center's Board meeting Michael and Xenia were taken to see the warehouse where a quarter of the collection was still being kept. At the



*Romanian student removing staples & metal paper clips*

Board meeting Christopher Marsh explained that so far 75% of the collection had been moved to the Center: all the books had been sorted; 60% of the country files, including the samizdat, had been moved into acid-free folders; and most of the

journals had been sorted and some had been bound. All books were now on the shelves but not yet logically organised; they would eventually have to be centrally processed by the Baylor library; currently they were catalogued according to the Library of Congress system. The library of the Keston Center was growing; during a recent visit to Russia, Christopher Marsh had returned with a large quantity of new books. Binding and digitisation was funded by the library; it now had a machine which could digitise 2,400 pages of a book an hour. So far, of the samizdat, only the Aida Skripnikova trial transcript had been digitised, so Xenia asked about future plans. Christopher



*Entrance to Keston Center: boxes await sorting or ready for the binders*



*Centre: miniature St Mark's Gospel printed secretly in USSR*

Marsh explained that at the moment Larisa Seago, the archivist, and some of his graduate students were concentrating on preserving the documents – it was 'band-aid preservation' stage, he said, i.e. basic conservation. Staples and metal paper clips had to be painstakingly removed from every piece of paper, all of which had to be unfolded. The stage for selecting material for digitisation had not yet been reached. A list of samizdat was being

compiled in Excel, as Keston's card index of samizdat could not be coordinated with the documents themselves. The cataloguing system used by Keston UK, according to countries followed by many sub-divisions (e.g. each



*Armenian researcher using the Youens Library*

denomination) was still being used. Extremely expensive photo-protective sleeves had recently been bought for the photograph archive.



*Cutting from Baptist Times (24 November 1988) in unsorted file waiting to be moved to acid-free folder*



*Journals, some newly bound, on shelves in the Michael Bourdeaux Room*

During the meeting Xenia and Michael were shown round the Center. The room next to the Michael Bourdeaux Room, where the Board meeting was held, was now beautifully organised. It had been named the Youens Library with a plaque on the wall which was given to Keston's library by Canon John Youens as a memorial to his daughter Georgina, who

was killed in a 1977 plane crash (John Youens was a Council member and gave a great deal of money to the library). At considerable expense a central structure had been made containing drawers for files and shelves for books. To the right were moveable metal shelves, which made maximum use of the space available, for the acid-free folders. On all the other walls were shelves for the books. Bound volumes of journals were held in the Michael Bourdeaux Room. Boxes of journals for the binders were in the entrance corridor as well as many boxes of as yet unsorted material. A large office next to the Michael Bourdeaux Room was now the domain of Larisa Seago and gave the Center extra space. Larisa was a qualified archivist and, although often overwhelmed by the size of the task before her, was enthusiastic about her job and fascinated by the material. She told Xenia that she liked boxes to arrive some time



*Michael talks to Larisa Seago in her office*

before she and her student assistants started sorting them, so that the paper could get acclimatised and settled down in the new temperature which was more than cool (Larisa sometimes froze sitting at her desk!). She carefully instructed those who were asked to help remove staples and paper clips – a repetitive, long and laborious job. The contents of each file were listed during this process and entered on the Excel catalogue.



*Keston Center Board meeting: (left to right) Bill Hair, Christopher Marsh, Michael Bourdeaux, Daniel Payne (photograph taken by Xenia Dennen)*

Christopher Marsh told Michael and Xenia that he had submitted an

application for a large grant to carry out a comparative study of religious discrimination in Astrakhan, Samara and Tatarstan. If this application was successful, such a study would keep the Keston Center busy for at least three years.yah Although much had already been achieved during 2007 and 2008, it was only in 2009, he thought, that the Center would really be usable, and in five years, he estimated, it would be fully organised.

# *Prayers*

## **Albania**

Give thanks for the growth of new Christian communities and the development of good inter-faith relations. Pray for the suppression of people trafficking.

## **Balkans**

Pray for a reduction in national animosities and the evolution of a spirit of cooperation. Pray for the future of the Serbian Orthodox Church and for inter-denominational and inter-faith reconciliation.

## **China**

Give thanks for the remarkable revival of Christian faith in China, and pray that this sign of God's activity in the world inspire other parts of the Christian Church.

## **Georgia**

'I pray that my country will be free and that all the people of Georgia will live in peace and harmony with each other and their neighbours' (Archbishop Malkhaz Songulashvili). Pray for Bishop Zaal Chimchiuri and his wife Nasi and for all those suffering in Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

## **Russia**

Pray for the political situation in Russia today; for a reduction in the tension between Russia and the West – the new so-called 'Cold War'; for future elections; for an end to racism and anti-semitism.

For the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church following the death of Patriarch Alexi on 5 December 2008.

For the growth at a local level of inter-denominational cooperation and mutual respect; for local organisations trying to help the poor, drug addicts and children at risk.

For the Russian Orthodox priest Fr Pavel Adelheim, who was dismissed last year from his post as priest-in-charge at the Church of the Myrrh-Bearing Women in Pskov, near Russia's western border.

For the Altai in southern Siberia: for harmonious relationships between the Christian Churches, the Russian Orthodox, Catholics, Old Believers, Lutherans, Baptists and Pentecostals.

## **Keston and Baylor**

Give thanks for the safe transit of the valuable Keston Archive from Oxford to Baylor. Pray for the continuing development of fruitful relations between Baylor and Keston. Pray for Council members, for those who work for Keston and give thanks for all those who support Keston's work.



# The Keston Archive

## Transcript of Aida Skripnikova's Trial



Larisa Seago, archivist at the Keston Center for Religion State & Society, with the Skripnikova trial transcript

*Aida Skripnikova as a young Baptist belonging to the reform wing of the Evangelical Christian and Baptist Church (ECB) was tried in July 1968 for distributing literature about the persecution of her Church in the Soviet Union. She was accused under Article 190/1 of the RSFSR Criminal Code of distributing 'deliberately false statements, slandering the Soviet state and social order' but, after refusing a defence lawyer, she presented her own arguments in her defence, claiming that none of the information she had helped circulate was untrue; on the contrary, it revealed the real situation of religious believers in the USSR – it was all true and could not be described as slander. Also, she argued, it did not harm the Soviet state and social order. Despite her vigorous defence she was found guilty and sentenced to three years of imprisonment. The transcript of Aida's trial, written in biro on long strips of cotton material, was brought out to the West and given to Keston where its staff translated the text. This unique document is being carefully preserved in the Keston Center at Baylor University where each strip of material has been placed between*

*sheets of special paper and in acid-free folders cut to the exact size of each strip. Larisa Seago, the Center's archivist, consulted conservationists who recommended how the document should be kept. Furthermore, this document has been digitised and can be seen on the Center's website, [www.baylor.edu/kestoncenter](http://www.baylor.edu/kestoncenter). We print below an extract – Aida's cross-examination – from Keston's translation of the transcript.*

**Judge:** Defendant, do you wish to give the court an explanation concerning the charge against you?

**Aida:** Yes, I do. I admit the facts about distributing literature as mentioned in the indictment, and about the recipients as mentioned.

**Judge:** Name them.

**Aida:** I gave Jursmar from Sweden a copy of the *Herald of Salvation* No. 19, several *Fraternal Leaflets*, [*Reform Baptist samizdat. Ed*] transcripts of trials in Moscow and Ryazan; to my sister in Magnitogorsk I sent a copy of *Herald of Salvation*; to Shishkina at Ogorodnika village, Kirov region, I sent copies of *Herald of Salvation* Nos. 11, 15, 18, 19. I may have sent her some other numbers. I don't remember. And I sent a copy of *Herald of*

*Salvation* to David abroad.

**Judge:** To where exactly did you send David *Herald of Salvation* No. 20, to what country?

**Aida:** I sent it to Sweden. I'd like to make one remark about the indictment. In the indictment *Fraternal Leaflet* is called a journal. It's not a journal, it's a leaflet, usually two or three pages. Among the evidence there are copies of it, which were taken from me during the search. I sent my sister in Magnitogorsk a copy of *Herald of Salvation*, not *Fraternal Leaflets*.

**Judge:** Everything else in the indictment is correct?

**Aida:** Yes. All the facts about the distribution of literature are correct. But this literature does not contain deliberately false statements slandering the Soviet state and social order,

that is, this does not constitute a crime under article 190/1, and the distribution of literature in itself is not a crime, therefore I plead not guilty.

**Judge:** Where and when did you get to know Jursmar?

**Aida:** I won't answer that question, because that's a private matter.

**Judge:** We're not asking you this question because we want to interfere in your private life. You're charged with giving Jursmar literature, therefore the court is interested in your friendship with her.

**Aida:** All right, I'll tell you. I have a good Christian friend in Sweden, Bengt Persson. And when Jursmar came to Leningrad, Bengt gave her my address so that she could visit me. If I go to some other town, for example to Perm, then the believers in Leningrad can give me the address of their friends in Perm so that I can visit them. That's how it was in this case.

**Judge:** Before Jursmar came to see you, you didn't know her?

**Aida:** No.

**Judge:** Did Jursmar tell you where she works, what she does?

**Aida:** She told me she works as a typist.

**Judge:** Where does she work as a typist, do you know?

**Aida:** She works at the Slavic Mission.

**Judge:** Indeed, the Slavic Mission.

**Aida:** Well? So what? The Slavic Mission is a religious organisation, and no jurist in the world can ever call it anything else.

**Judge:** What did Jursmar bring you?

**Aida:** New Testaments.

**Judge:** How many?

**Aida:** Fifty. But the police took them from me.

**Judge:** Whom did these New Testaments come from?

**Aida:** It's all the same to me.

**Judge:** What were you going to do with such a large number of New Testaments?

**Aida:** Give them out.

**Judge:** To whom?

**Aida:** To believers who do not have one.

**Procurator:** The New Testaments that Jursmar brought you, what was their content?

**Aida:** They were the same as any New Testament.

**Procurator:** The content of a New Testament depends on the edition. It depends on where it was published.

**Aida:** The content of a New Testament is never altered. They're always the same. If we had enough New Testaments, I wouldn't be getting them from abroad. It's all the same to me where they're printed, in Moscow or in Stockholm.

**Judge:** Why did you give Jursmar copies of

the *Herald of Salvation* and *Fraternal Leaflet*, transcripts of trials in Moscow and Ryazan, and letters of Khorev and Makhovitsky?

**Aida:** So that she could read them and find out about the life of our church. The journal *Herald of Salvation* is my favourite journal. The *Fraternal Leaflets* speak about the life of our church. Trials have become so much a part of our church life that to know about the Russian church, you must know about the trials.

**Judge:** Was this literature intended only for Jursmar?

**Aida:** No, for other believers too.

**Judge:** You were completely unacquainted with Jursmar until 7 November. And then you give a foreign subject, a Swedish citizen, whom you hardly know, the journal *Herald of Salvation* and private letters. Were you sure that this unknown foreigner would not use the literature received from you for harmful purposes?

**Aida:** With believers, friendships develop more simply. I can go to a strange town, meet believers, whom I didn't know before, and after a few minutes we can become close friends.

**Judge:** You gave Jursmar copies of *Fraternal Leaflet*, and transcripts of trials so that, as you put it, they could get to know about the life of your church there; but then why did you give her letters from Khorev and Makhovitsky?

**Aida:** They're interesting letters.

**Judge:** The letters of Khorev and Makhovitsky don't contain deliberately false statements. You're not charged with passing them on. But why did you give them? After all, they're private letters. Makhovitsky is writing to his wife and children. Who could be interested in this letter?

**Aida:** Believers are one big family and we are interested in everything about each other.

**Judge:** Makhovitsky's letter in itself does not contain deliberately false statements, but when it is put with all the literature saying that in this country people are persecuted for their faith, then there must be a particular reason for sending it: to show Makhovitsky, the father of seven children, sentenced for his faith, is suffering in prison and longing for his children. Makhovitsky certainly was sentenced, but not for his faith – for illegal activity.

**Procurator:** Did Makhovitsky ask you to pass on his letter?

**Aida:** No.

**Procurator:** How could you pass on a private letter without permission?

**Judge:** There is a law protecting the secrecy of private correspondence.

**Procurator:** You are breaking that law.

**Aida:** If Makhovitsky's wife brings a court case against me for violating the secrecy of her correspondence, well then I'll have to answer before this law!

**Procurator:** (laughing) Of course she won't bring a court case against you.

**Judge:** When you gave the literature to Jursmar, did you consider how she might use it?

**Aida:** No, I didn't. She could dispose of it as she thought best.

**Judge:** But you didn't think of the fact that the literature could be used against our country?

**Aida:** Jursmar is a believer like me. I trust her. The literature that I gave her is good. It could not in any way be used for harmful ends.

**Procurator:** The evidence includes a notebook confiscated from you during the search. Does it belong to you?

**Aida:** Yes.

**Procurator:** In your notebook there are a lot of foreign addresses: did you have correspondence with all of them?

**Aida:** With some of them. I don't know any law forbidding one to correspond with friends abroad. *[There follows a list of people with whom Aida was in contact]*

**Procurator:** What time did Jursmar come to you?

**Aida:** She came at about half past eight in the evening.

**Procurator:** Did you talk together?

**Aida:** Yes.

**Procurator:** What did you talk about?

**Aida:** We told each other about ourselves and about the church.

**Procurator:** A notebook was confiscated from Jursmar; did she make notes from what you said?

**Aida:** I saw Jursmar's notebook and a translation of it among the evidence, but I don't understand all the notes.

**Procurator:** Jursmar's notebook is a short account of what happened that evening. A sort of consultation between Jursmar and Skripnikova. What questions did they discuss? A whole programme of action was worked out. Stirring up foreign bodies to address letters and protests to members of the Soviet government. Organize a series of broadcasts on the BBC and Voice of America. Tell us, defendant, what questions did you discuss with Jursmar?

**Aida:** I don't remember all our conversation. There's nothing in the notebook about a series

of broadcasts on the BBC. She only wrote BBC that's all.

**Judge:** In Jursmar's notebook there's this note: 'Three awaiting trial in Leningrad: a man and two women.' That's obviously about Zhukova, Lukas and Semenova. They were under investigation at that time. Did you tell Jursmar about that?

**Aida:** I don't remember. I may have told her that three people had been arrested in Leningrad. I can't remember everything we talked about.

**Judge:** If three of your fellow believers had been arrested, surely you would have told her about that. It must have been worrying you at the time. It's hard to believe that in talking to Jursmar you wouldn't have mentioned it.

**Aida:** It looks as if I did tell her; of course I must have done.

**Judge:** Jursmar has written: 'One of the women is expecting a child.' Who is meant here?

**Aida:** I don't know why that's written there, it's difficult to understand somebody else's notes. Neither Zhukova nor Semenova has any children, Lukas has six children.

**Judge:** Jursmar has written a note about the amnesty *[an amnesty was declared in 1967 on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution. Ed]* claiming that it didn't apply to believers. Did she write that down from what you said?

**Aida:** I don't know, maybe I told her about the amnesty, I don't remember.

**Procurator:** But Jursmar didn't meet anybody else except you.

**Aida:** I don't remember talking to Jursmar about the amnesty. She wrote, 'Believers are considered dangerous criminals'. She could have written that as her own conclusion, because believers have not been released under the amnesty. Of course I could have told Jursmar that the amnesty did not apply to believers. I simply can't remember all that we talked about. We probably did talk about the amnesty. Everybody was waiting for it, both we and our brothers and sisters abroad, but it hardly benefited believers.

**Judge:** The decree about the amnesty was issued on 1 October. You met Jursmar on 7 November. You realise that by that time no



2005: Aida in St Petersburg



one could have been amnestied. The liberation committees were just beginning to function, but you were already telling people abroad that the amnesty didn't apply to believers.

**Aida:** My friends had written to me from prison-camp and said that they had been called before the commission and that they hadn't been freed.

**Judge:** You're getting confused. They couldn't have written you that by 7 November.

**Procurator:** The amnesty was applied at the trials of Lukas, Zhukova and Semenova. The court sentenced them to three years, but the decree on the amnesty was applied and cut it by 1½ years. But you were telling people abroad that the amnesty didn't affect believers.

**Aida:** I wrote to Persson later and told him that the amnesty had been applied to Lukas, Zhukova and Semenova and 1½ years taken off. But in general they applied the amnesty to hardly any believers.

**Judge:** You were well acquainted with the contents of the literature you gave to Jursmar?

**Aida:** Yes.

**Judge:** Do you consider that the real situation is truly represented in the literature you passed on?

**Aida:** Yes.

**Judge:** You gave Jursmar a transcript of the trial in Ryazan. Are you sure that this transcript is accurate, that what was written down is what was said at the trial? From here, you see, I can clearly note what is happening in the courtroom. Some people started to try and take it all down. But what can you note down in such conditions? A few words. Would this be a transcript of the trial?

**Aida:** I was at the trial in Ryazan and there the conditions for a transcript were better. It was done quite well and the speech of the Procurator was very well transcribed.

**Judge:** The journal *Herald of Salvation* No. 19 speaks of persecution. In the article 'A century's path of struggle and suffering' [*this was written by Aida and others in 1967*. Ed] it says that believers are victimised, dismissed from work and excluded from educational institutions, but specific facts are not cited. It doesn't state who's been dismissed from work and expelled from educational institutions, nor where, nor when.

**Aida:** The article was written in general terms.

**Judge:** There must be facts. You can write what you will, but facts must be supported. You must have thought about that when you sent the journal abroad.

**Aida:** To have cited the facts in the *Herald of Salvation* would have been out of place: the articles would then have turned out very long. When the Council of Prisoners' Relatives

[*organisation, set up by a group of Baptist women, which collected information on ECB prisoners*. Ed] wrote to the General Secretary of the United Nations, U Thant, specific facts about persecutions were pointed out in the letter.

**Procurator:** In the article 'A century's path of struggle and suffering' it says that there's persecution of believers in the Soviet Union, people are dismissed from work and not allowed to study. But not one fact is cited. You send this journal abroad and there they will draw their own conclusions; that in general all believers in the Soviet Union are persecuted. You don't cite specific facts.

**Aida:** The *Herald of Salvation* isn't published for people abroad. All we believers know very well about persecution. The history of the church is described in the article 'A century's path of struggle and suffering' and it's a true description. But the facts can't be enumerated, otherwise one article, such as this one, would take up the whole journal.

**Procurator:** Do you recognise other denominations?

**Aida:** What do you mean?

**Procurator:** In the Soviet Union there are various denominations. Do you recognise them?

**Aida:** I recognise them, I don't share their convictions, but I do recognise that they exist.

**Procurator:** You write about the persecution of believers, but do you know about persecution of believers of other denominations?

**Aida:** I don't know about the persecution of believers of other denominations; we write only about the persecution of believers of the Evangelical Christian and Baptist Church.

**Procurator:** You write and don't point out the facts, but abroad surely, they could think that all believers in general are persecuted in this country?

**Aida:** I don't know.

**Judge:** You know there will be people who will read this in all sorts of ways. At the trial in Moscow, Vins [*Georgi Vins and Gennadi Kryuchkov, the main leaders of the Reform Baptists, were tried in November 1966*. Ed] said that there are believers who are persecuted and again he does not cite the facts.

**Aida:** Vins did cite facts.

**Judge:** Vins simply said that believers were being dismissed from their jobs. But he doesn't cite the facts.

**Aida:** Kryuchkov gave several names of believers who were taken straight from work and tried in accordance with the decree on parasites. [*A campaign against parasitism was launched by Khrushchev in 1961*. Ed]

**Procurator:** Kryuchkov said that prayer houses were being demolished by bulldozers. With urban re-planning houses are sometimes demolished by bulldozers and among those are prayer houses. But this does *not* mean that believers are oppressed. In Leningrad in the Okhta district a prayer house was demolished.

**Aida:** In Leningrad a prayer house was demolished in the Okhta district, but a prayer house was given to a registered community [registration was a legal requirement, but Reform Baptist congregations were usually refused registration by the authorities. Ed] on Poklonnaya Hill and no one said and no one wrote that they had taken away a prayer house.

In Vladivostok for example, a prayer house was demolished by a bulldozer and they didn't give them a replacement. When prayer houses are destroyed and they give you no replacement, then our people say that believers have been deprived of a prayer house. Kryuchkov did speak about this at his trial. He named towns where they took away prayer houses.

**Procurator:** In Leningrad when the prayer house was demolished in the Okhta district they also said that believers were being deprived of a prayer house, and went and complained.

**Aida:** I never heard anything about this.

**Procurator:** In the *Herald of Salvation* No. 15 it is said that believers' children are persecuted in school. What's this persecution, what kind of persecution do these children undergo?

**Aida:** Children are taken away from their parents because of their Christian upbringing. Two such cases are described in the letter to U Thant. In Kazan a daughter was taken away from believers; the two children of the Christian Sloboda family in the Vitebsk region were taken away from them. In Smolensk the son of Lidia Govorun was taken away; it's true that he was then returned after a time. I can't state other facts now, I simply don't remember names, but there were other cases as well when believers' children were taken away from them.

**Procurator:** You keep telling us about other towns, but let's talk about Leningrad. Have they taken away children from any in Leningrad?

**Aida:** No, there have been no such cases in Leningrad.

**Procurator:** But is there persecution of

children in schools? What sort of persecution is it?

**Aida:** They question children in schools.

**Procurator:** Who questions them?

**Aida:** The men from the procurator's office. They take a child from a lesson and question him for several hours. Parents have reported this.

**Procurator:** By law men from the procurator's office can question those under age if it's essential for a case. Both believers' and unbelievers' children can be questioned. When they started the criminal case against Zhukova it was essential to question several children, because she was accused of organising religious activities with children. Questioning of those under age does not contravene the law. This isn't persecution.

**Aida:** But they asked children about belief. Sometimes children are kept behind after lessons; they chat with them; they say that they mustn't go to the meetings; they mustn't listen to their parents when they talk about God.

**Procurator:** Provision is made by law for anti-religious education in schools.

**Aida:** If a teacher at a lesson carries on an anti-religious conversation with all the children, all right; but when they leave a child alone after lessons and carry on a conversation with him separately, it's a different matter. An adult can deal calmly with such conversations, but for a child this can be traumatic. Children have lived under the fear that they would be taken to a state home. I could name such children in Leningrad, but I do not want to cause anxiety to these families.

**Procurator:** The law forbids the imposition of belief on those under age.

**Aida:** But the law does not forbid the imposition of atheism.

**Procurator:** Atheism isn't religion. A child grows up and then he must himself decide his attitude towards belief. Atheism isn't imposed.

**Aida:** Then what does one say to a child? That one is forbidden, by law, to say that God exists, but to say that there is no God is allowed?

**Judge:** Will the defendant not digress from the main point.

**Procurator:** The *Fraternal Leaflet* Nos. 5-6 for 1965 states, 'We shall pray that it should conform to the highest principles of goodness, peace and justice.' Here the Constitution is the subject. The government had proposed to work out a project for a new Constitution, and



*The trial transcript today*

here in the *Fraternal Leaflet* they write: 'We shall pray that the new Constitution should conform to the highest principles of goodness, peace and justice.' Abroad they could conclude that the Constitution at present in force does not conform to these principles.

**Aida:** You can understand it in two ways.

**Procurator:** That's exactly the point – all your literature can be understood in two ways. What laws relating to religion do you know?

**Aida:** I know the Constitution, I know article 124 of it and the decree of 1929; I know the law on the separation of the church from the state. [*Article 124 of the Soviet Constitution guaranteed citizens freedom of conscience. The 1929 Law on Religious Associations, referred to here as 'the decree of 1929', was introduced by Stalin to restrict religious activity. The law on separation of church and state was adopted in 1918.* Ed]

**Procurator:** You know that a religious community must be registered?

**Aida:** Yes.

**Procurator:** Your community did not register, therefore you are prevented from holding meetings, but not because there's persecution of believers in our country.

**Aida:** Our community requested registration. We put in an application but we were refused.

**Procurator:** You were refused because you refuse to observe the law.

**Aida:** Which laws do we not observe?

**Procurator:** You're demanding the creation of Sunday schools and to organise religious activities for children under age.

**Aida:** I don't remember that our community demanded a Sunday school. By law parents can bring up their children as they wish.

**Procurator:** No, they can't. It's forbidden by law to involve children under age in religious societies. But you refuse to reckon with our laws.

**Aida:** We aren't asking for anything which is illegal. I cannot understand what it is we are doing which is illegal.

**Judge:** Haven't you understood yet?

**Aida:** No, I haven't. According to the Constitution we have freedom of religious belief. The word implies a confession of faith. It means that it is possible to tell everyone about God, that is, to profess one's belief freely. We don't say of course that we'll stand up in the middle of the shop floor at work, during working hours and begin to preach. No one does *that*.

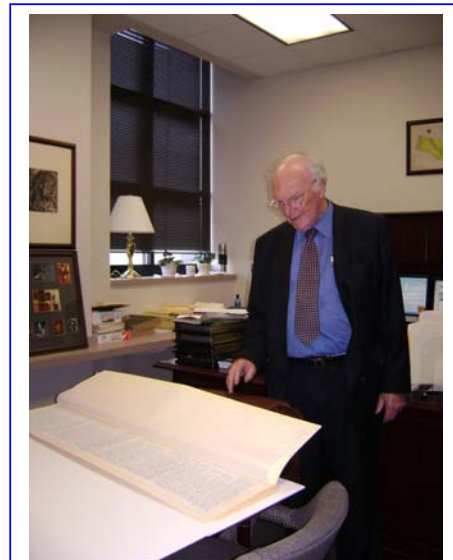
**Judge:** In a letter of 12 November 1967 addressed to Bengt, you write, 'I was afraid that Lota would be tried for everything she took from us.' You say that there are no deliberately false statements in the literature

you passed on. In that case, why were you afraid she might be tried because of them?

**Aida:** Because persecutors don't like it when the fact of their persecution becomes known. I know that in the literature I gave Jursmar there were no deliberately false statements. In the *Herald of Salvation* No. 19 and in the *Fraternal Leaflets* where the situation of believers is described, it's described as it really is. I agree with you that it's unattractive, but this *is* real life and it must be talked about. When I was handing over the literature to Jursmar I knew that these persecutors could get me locked up. I understand that.

**Procurator:** In sending information abroad making out that in the Soviet Union believers are persecuted for their faith, and in handing over transcripts of trials, did you consider the fact that you would thus harm your country?

**Aida:** I knew that this wouldn't harm Russia. To bring disgrace on our persecutors is another



*Michael Bourdeaux is shown the transcript during his visit to the Keston Center in November 2008*

matter; but shouldn't they perhaps be put to shame? Our country could be the most beautiful country in the world, were there no persecution here. Persecution only does harm. If there were no persecution, Russia would gain a great deal.

**Procurator:** We've got used to calling our country the Soviet Union. This denotes the state structure and is used also in the political sense. 'Russia' is a geographical concept. What meaning do you attach to the word 'Russia'?

**Aida:** I call our country 'Russia' because this name is very dear to me. I include in the word 'Russia' not only the geographical concept, but also the people and the customs which I love.



As for the political meaning, I understand little about that.

**Procurator:** Whom do you mean by the word 'persecutors'?

**Aida:** The atheists who've been given extensive rights to persecute believers.

**Procurator:** But why do they only persecute you, why don't they persecute other denominations?

**Aida:** I don't know about other denominations.

**Procurator:** But they'll come to the conclusion abroad that all believers are persecuted in the Soviet Union.

**Aida:** I don't know what conclusions people will come to there.

**Procurator:** Do you read any other literature besides religious literature?

**Aida:** I read fiction.

**Procurator:** And do you read the newspapers?

**Aida:** I look through them.

**Procurator:** Do you read any newspapers other than the *Herald of Salvation*?

**Aida:** Sometimes.

**Procurator:** Exactly which newspapers?

**Aida:** I don't know what to say. . . those which come my way.

**Procurator:** And do you go to the cinema?

**Aida:** No.

**Procurator:** Do you watch television?

**Aida:** No.

**Procurator:** How do you find out about the life of the Soviet people? You don't watch television, you don't go to the cinema, you don't read Soviet fiction.

**Aida:** The life of the people is in front of my eyes.

**Procurator:** But you haven't worked for a year in a workers' collective; you haven't had

contact with them. Where could you see the life of the people? You stayed at home. Boiko used to come and see you and Skurlova and that was all.

**Aida:** I didn't stay at home all the time.

**Procurator:** I don't mean you didn't go out of the house. But all this time you went around in your own milieu. You couldn't know about the life of the people, and here you are introducing yourself to foreigners as a representative of the Russian church, and you yourself don't even know about the life of the people. How did you take on such a role?

**Aida:** I didn't introduce myself to foreigners as a representative of the Russian church. I'm an ordinary member of the community.

**Procurator:** I am not saying that you had any official authority. But foreigners saw you as a representative of the Russian church. How could you tell foreigners about the life of our people if you didn't know about it yourself?

**Aida:** I spoke only about what I know well. I told them about the life of believers.

**Procurator:** But you don't even know about the life of believers. You say that you're persecuted. But in our country there are other denominations; they aren't persecuted! Why is it just you who are persecuted? [*Plenty of evidence on the persecution of other denominations – of Orthodox, Catholics, Adventists, Pentecostals – can be found in the Keston Archive.* Ed]

**Aida:** I'm firmly convinced that a man who sincerely believes, faithfully follows God and acts independently of what he is called, whether he's Baptist or Orthodox. But we write only about our church because we know it well.



*The Archive's new home in the Keston Center*

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